

OPEN AND SHUT?

Wednesday, June 29, 2016

Open access and Brexit

The UK research community's response to the recent referendum – in which a majority of 52% voted for the UK to leave the European Union (or “Brexit”) – has been one of horror and disbelief.

This is no surprise, not least because Brexit would have a serious impact on research funding in the UK. *Nature* reports that UK universities currently get around 16% of their research funding from the EU, and that the UK currently hosts more EU-funded holders of ERC grants than any other member state. Elsewhere, Digital Science has estimated that the UK could lose £1 billion in science funding if the UK government does not make up the shortfall in EU-linked research funds.

And a recent Outsell report noted that EU research funds accounted for, on average, more than £900m of funding each year between 2009 and 2015, or the equivalent of one-third of the competitive funding provided by the UK's research agencies.

But what are the implications of Brexit for open access? Given the highly volatile situation the UK now finds itself in we cannot say anything for certain. However, any squeeze on funding will surely be detrimental to current plans to migrate scholarly publishing from a subscription to an open access system.

It is, after all, generally agreed that the transition to open access will require additional funding, if only in the short term. To this we should add that the UK has been one of the main advocates for open access within the EU, and globally.

Meanwhile, the other major advocate for open access in Europe – The Netherlands – is about to give up its Presidency of the EU. During their Presidency, the Dutch managed to persuade member states to agree to a commitment to make all scientific papers freely available by 2020.

There was always scepticism as to how achievable the EU goal is, but Brexit would seem to make it much less achievable. As The Wellcome Trust's Robert Kiley points out on the questions I have posed about OA and Brexit, “The EU recently set a target of 100 per cent OA by 2020. How this was to be achieved was unclear, but without the UK at the table arguments in favour of gold will be less vocal.”

So what do OA advocates think about the current situation? Below long-time proponent of open access, and Professor of Structural Biology at Imperial College London, Stephen Curry offers some thoughts.

As an indication of just how uncertain the situation is note that Stephen asked me to preface his answers with this statement: “*Readers should please bear in mind that my answers have been composed while I am still keenly feeling the pain and confusion surrounding the outcome of the EU referendum. Ask me again tomorrow and my answers could well be different.*”



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The interview begins ...

*RP: I realise that Brexit raises more pressing issues for UK academics than any impact it might have on the transition to open access, and that much still remains uncertain about how Brexit will play out, but what in your view would be the likely implications for open access if the kind of fears expressed in, for instance, **this piece** in Physics Today were to be realised?*



Stephen Curry

SC: You're right that there are many more pressing issues – loss of funding, loss of a leadership role within EU research programs, loss of influence – to say nothing of the fact that the UK now feels a much more unwelcoming place to students and staff from overseas.

The scale of this seems unimaginable. And everyone is disorientated because it's clear that there is no plan for Brexit at the moment. It is all still to be worked out.

In the meantime, there is still the hope that the process of leaving will unravel; that the country, seeing the damage being inflicted, will find some way to step back. But even that just adds to the ongoing confusion and uncertainty. With all this going on, it is hard even to think about OA.

RP: Brexiteers say that it is “unlikely that universities will be bereft of funding”. But how confident can we be that Brexit will have little or no impact on university funding, and that if the UK does suffer economically costs for open access will not be one of the first victims?

SC: Brexiters have consistently underplayed the risks and costs of leaving the EU – as has already become plain.

The UK is a net contributor to the EU overall but ‘wins’ in terms of research funding. That will disappear if our subsequent agreement (and when will that be fashioned?) doesn't include a commitment to freedom of movement, and that doesn't seem likely right now.

Even if we save on the EU contribution (by no means guaranteed, especially if we want access to the single market), the ongoing decline in the pound, the drop in the stockmarket and the flight of industries and jobs will likely propel the economy into recession, reducing tax receipts and the possibility that the government will be able to ‘compensate’ UK science for the loss of EU funds. To do so the government would have to demonstrate a commitment to investing in R&D that has not been evident from past settlements of flat cash or, more recently, flat value.

In those circumstances, there could well be pressure on funds for OA. But perhaps that might make RCUK/UKRI get tough on fundees to seek value for money when publishing? They've been reluctant to date but these are strange times. Who knows?

RP: In 2013 RCUK anticipated that a full transition to open access would be completed within “around five years” [2018] and that by that time 75% of OA papers would be published as gold OA. It is also now widely accepted that – at least in the short term – a transition to open access will require additional funding (to pay the APCs generally needed for gold

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OA). If UK research funders and institutions faced a reduction in funding as a result of Brexit might the money needed for a transition to OA no longer be available, or significantly curtailed? If so, what sort of threat would that present for the OA movement?

SC: I think there's a risk of that. I'm never sure what you mean by "the OA movement" – to me it's a heterogeneous collection of individuals and organisations with diverse emphases on the key articles of the various declarations – but it would pose a challenge to those of us in the UK who advocate the wider adoption of OA for scholarly research. I, for one, am up for that challenge. The argument for OA remains unchanged and the means to achieve it have always been the subject of debate.

RP: One possibility, I guess, is that much greater stress would be placed on green OA. But green OA does not offer any kind of transition to open access does it? And as publishers impose ever more onerous embargo conditions does green OA really offer a realistic long-term solution?

SC: That could be a direction to go in, particularly with the start of the HEFCE policy. I don't think green OA is the long-term solution though it's an effective interim measure. We will have to be vigilant in spotting and calling out extensions to embargo periods – particularly since I have not seen any convincing evidence that they are a cost to publishers.

RP: Presumably there are also implications for the EU. Along with The Netherlands, the UK has been the main driver of OA at a European level. As a result, in April the Amsterdam Call for Action on Open Science set a target of achieving full open access for all scientific publications by 2020 [A goal subsequently agreed on by the ministers of science, innovation, trade, and industry of member states at the May Competitiveness Council]. With the UK set to leave the EU might we see a fall-off in interest in OA within the EU?

SC: The UK has certainly been an influential voice (even if it hasn't been able to induce many other nations to follow it down the gold-preferring route), but it is by no means the only one as far as I can tell.

The whole Brexit process could well be a huge distraction for the rest of the EU so perhaps the 2020 deadline (rather notional in any case for some?) might slip. But perhaps not – the HEFCE policy should be effective in achieving the aspiration in the UK and that could be an example for others. I'm not as clued into EU machinations as some but I will be sorry that the UK is excluded from EU discussions on OA.

Hope springs eternal: perhaps there are clever and pragmatic ways we might still be involved. There would be no want of volunteers in my view.

RP: While there has been much discussion over what the UK might lose financially as a result of Brexit, the UK is the third largest contributor to the EU budget. If it leaves, therefore, presumably the EU will face a 12.5% fall in its budget. Again, if transitioning to open access will – at least in the short term – cost more, is it not likely that the EU will need to cut its cloth, and that in doing so it will conclude that open access is not as high a priority as it was?

SC: The UK is a net contributor so I guess there will be some contraction of the EU budget. It won't be 12.5% because the size of the EU would also fall if the UK leaves. The EU has its own economic woes but investors looking to exit the UK could well end up in the EU, so who knows what the net effect will be?

Part of the argument for OA in science and engineering is to disseminate the raw material for developing new technologies, and that hasn't gone away. If

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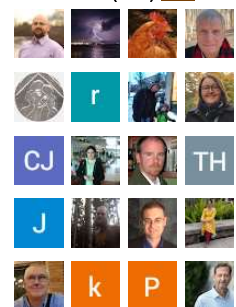
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anything the pressures of Brexit could make it seem more needed than ever. Who knows?

RP: *What if any implications for OA are there here for those in North America and the rest of the world?*

SC: If the UK loses some of its momentum on OA, I wonder if the some of the noise it has created around OA might be lost.

RP: *What does this all mean for scholarly publishers?*

SC: This is a fantastic opportunity for them to demonstrate what they really mean when they talk about being “partners” with the research community. I hope many will seize that opportunity to make a positive contribution to the situation.

Any hint of publishers seeking to take advantage of what is going to be a painful period for the UK research community should be called out and opposed. Like I said, hope springs eternal.

RP: *Thank you for taking time to answer these questions.*



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Posted by Richard Poynder at [11:11](#)



1 comment:

Leonid Schneider said...



In fact, it could become an interesting experiment in low-cost Open Access. As you point out, economic depression-hit post-Brexit UK science (possibly without Scotland!) may face either abandoning the goal of OA, or to find cheaper ways to achieve it. If they choose the 2nd option, green OA would indeed be the only way. Britain might even become a role model after all!

June 29, 2016 3:17 pm

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